

If you come by the Chanute campus right now you'll see quite the mess in the four central buildings. We are in the process of replacing the drop ceiling with a new ceiling grid and tiles in all of the common areas. It's going to look great as we continue with our never-ending process of maintaining and updating the campus.

It seems one of the younger workers who was helping replace the ceiling was a bit perplexed about the walls in the hallway in Stoltz and Sanders Halls. He was a little upset that he had to replace the ceiling in these little alcoves in the hallways. His older foreman said, "If you can guess what those alcoves are for, I'll do the ceiling above them for you." I'll try to set the stage.

The little wall alcoves are about 18 inches wide, about 8 inches deep, and currently empty. Keep in mind that Stoltz and Sanders were built in 1968. Can you guess what they were for?

If you guessed, "pay phone" you would be right. Of course the young worker, did not get it right and instead said, "Some architectural design element?" He had to put the ceiling in. He may never have seen a pay phone. Cell phones have pretty much eliminated the pay phone.

Things change at the college and move on, changing gradually bit by bit, or sometimes all at once. And it's been amazing to watch!

This month I received my 20th year plaque at NCCC. It seems like it was yesterday or 100 years ago, one of the two, that my family and I moved to Chanute. My wife was not happy living in the snow belt of Michigan where it snowed 99 inches on average (that's not an exaggeration for comedic effect, that's the actual average). She was raised in Fredonia, Kansas and was excited to be home.

My girls were 1 and 3 when we pulled into town, just really starting to talk, grow and develop. Jen didn't have a job and was looking to restart her Masters in Counseling. So lots of change all at once at home.

I remember walking around Main Street the first day or two in town and stopping in a shop. The shopkeeper looked at me kind of funny and asked, "Where are you from?" I said, "Oh, we just moved here from Michigan." She replied, "Your name is Brian Inbody and you are the new Vice President at the college." She read it in the Chanute Tribune. Welcome to small town Kansas!

I dropped off the moving truck after making the big leap to come here (truth be told I had another offer from an urban community college near my mom, but NCCC and my Mother-in-Law in Fredonia won out on that.) I stopped in to drop off the keys and the man who ran the truck rental place asked, "What brings you to Chanute?" and I replied quite excitedly, "I'm going to be the new Vice President at the college!" He said in a very sarcastic tone, "Humph, good luck." And for good reason.

The college was not in great shape in 2003. We were on probation from the Higher Learning Commission, our accreditor. The roofs all leaked to the point there were water stains in the lighting instruments in the main hallways. The college was low on resources and we couldn't balance our ledgers with our bank statements. There was unrest between the community and its college and between the administration and the employees. I later found out that I was the 12th Vice President hired in 16 years. That's not good. Maybe I should have gone with my Mom instead of my Mother-in-Law.

But with a new President, a new Chief Financial Officer, a refocused Board of Trustees and a regenerated faculty and staff we turned all of that around! All of us came together and accomplished so much! And we haven't looked back.

Over the last 20 years we have seen the college grow in terms of enrollment; offering classes in Lawrence, LaHarpe, Garnett, Yates Center, and high schools throughout our service area and beyond. We launched the online campus that is now our second largest campus! We filled the residence halls and returned them to profitability. We built a brand new Ottawa Campus complete with a state-of-the-art Simulated Hospital. And we grew enrollment taking us from 18th of 19 community colleges to 14th.

We returned the college to offering a wide range of career and technical education programs such as Welding, Construction, HVAC, Electrical, Occupational Therapy Assistant, Surgical Technology, and Paralegal, just to name a few, and our newest programs Plumbing and Diagnostic Medical Sonography. NCCC is now the 5th highest performing community college in the state for Excel in CTE (high school students taking CTE classes). In fact, over half of our graduates are in career and tech ed!

We renovated science labs and nursing labs, even putting in a cadaver lab in Chanute-one of the very few in Kansas. We fixed those leaky roofs with metal roofs that will last a good long while and renovated the dining hall. Athletics added a new softball complex, a new clubhouse at the baseball field and was the first college in the Jayhawk conference to add a turf infield for both programs. We updated the gym floor and renovated the locker rooms. And we added a new indoor practice facility for soccer, baseball, and softball.

Most recently we added the Mitchell Career and Technology Center to make career and tech education cool again with an awesome new facility. Beginning this fall it will house seven programs in fantastic new labs and classrooms!

We turned the library into a 24-hour learning center with computer work stations and on-demand access to amazing online resources. We added unlimited tutoring and took over adult basic education/GED program for all of Southeast Kansas as well as the Ottawa area.

We improved learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Our data shows that we have some of the best results with student learning and completion in the nation and some of the highest scores on student satisfaction.

We increased employee morale and satisfaction adding and strengthening employee benefits and working conditions from new offices, to better health insurance, to better work/life balance.

Our finances are much stronger with significant reserves so that we did many of the items above without incurring much new debt. We were able to write a series of successful grants to bring in millions of dollars of aid into our service area to make NCCC better – from USDA grants, to two successful Title III grants, to Health and Human Services Grants. We also were able to secure more private donations to move the college forward without completely relying on local tax dollars. Most importantly, we cleaned up the books with an unprecedented 20 yearly financial audits in a row without a negative finding!

And we got off probation. In fact, we were the first college to go from probation to a full 10 year re-accreditation (back when they limited the years).

Whew! That's a lot I know, but I left out a lot too to fit it in this article. And we are not done!

As we enter my 21st year you'll be seeing the completion of a greenhouse on the Chanute campus, new parking lots at the Mitchell Career and Technology Center (MCTC) as well as the Ottawa Campus, and a new outdoor plaza at Chanute. We just got word this week that our next new program has been approved by KBOR – Automotive! So we will be adding that program in fall of 2024 to the MCTC – thanks to a successful grant! And, of course, those new ceilings in the older Chanute campus buildings.

The Higher Learning Commission is coming back this fall as well to see how we are doing and see if we have met their criteria (more on that in a later column), but I think we are ready!

Today, 20 years later, my girls are just about grown up. One got married last month and just landed an awesome job as a soon-to-be elementary counselor at Augusta Public Schools. The other girl is about to graduate from K-State in December and is headed to Europe for part of the summer to study supply chain logistics. Jen now has been at Royster Middle School for 18 years as the counselor and makes a difference every day.

It's been amazing to watch my kids grow along with the college. The girls would not have turned out as well as they had if not for all of the wonderful teachers, mentors and instructors as well as family, friends and, their wonderful mother.

The college too would not be where it is today without all of the wonderful employees, trustees, community members, and advocates that worked so hard to see it right itself and now lead the state in many ways. I am so proud to have been a part of that profound change for the last 20 years.

Thank you to the board of trustees both past and present for giving me this opportunity, this community for accepting me and my family, and our phenomenal employees, also both past and present for all you have done to make Neosho County Community College what it is today.

And thanks to the rental truck guy for the "good luck." It worked!

If you have any question about this article or anything else contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.